

Explore Cranberries for the Holidays

SO MUCH MORE THAN A SAUCE

Liz Tarditi



CRANBERRIES CARRY A REPUTATION AS ONE OF the holiday's most essential ingredients. Their tart snap cuts through the richness of a feast and their bright color lends instant cheer to both savory dishes and sweets. Native to North America, cranberries have long been part of seasonal traditions from Thanksgiving through the New Year, with Indigenous communities drying and sweetening them and colonial cooks stirring them into relishes and baked goods. And today no holiday table feels complete without their ruby glow.

What makes cranberries remarkable isn't just their festive color but their personality in the kitchen. They're one of the few fruits that thrive in cold weather, until harvested in late fall when most gardens are bare. Their natural acidity brightens both meat and pastry and their high pectin content makes them a dream for preserves.

Left whole, cranberries pop and burst like little flavor bombs. Dried, they concentrate into chewy nuggets of tangy sweetness.



Whether cooked into sauce, folded into batter or scattered across a salad, cranberries are endlessly adaptable — small berries with a big role to play. So, how will you use them this holiday season?

We asked **Peachtree Catering**, the company behind four distinctive local venues, for ideas. Known for crafting menus that celebrate seasonality with inventive twists, Peachtree's chefs approach the familiar with fresh eyes.

Pastry chef Jennifer Roach-Dixon finds cranberries indispensable in her repertoire. "They're naturally high in pectin," she explained. "That means they don't need added thickeners, so jams and jellies stay beautifully clear. And they're naturally gluten-free. That's important for many of our clients." She shared recipes featuring cranberries in four unexpected guises: in biscotti, individual tarts tatin, a cranberry-pear crisp and a panna cotta.

Chef tournant Omar Rosado contributed a sweet bread pudding. Rich and custardy, it gains a festive lift from cranberries — their brightness balancing richness and keeping a classic lively. Together, chefs Roach-Dixon and Rosado embody Peachtree's philosophy of freshness, craft and warm hospitality. Their holiday recipes show that cranberries are not just a garnish but a signature ingredient — capable of carrying a menu from first bite to final spoonful.

Rich in vitamin C, fiber and antioxidants, cranberries bring much more than color and flavor to the table — they offer real nourishment, too. Their tartness can be tamed with sugar or honey, but it can also be used as a bright contrast in savory dishes or a lively accent in cocktails.

This season, try cranberries beyond the sauce bowl — or worse, the can. After a little exploration and experimentation, you'll find these berries prove themselves to be not only a holiday tradition but an ingredient worth exploring all year long.

Cornmeal-Cranberry Biscotti

This recipe from Mary DiSomma's book, "A Gift of Cookies," adapted by pastry chef Jennifer Roach-Dixon for Peachtree Catering, makes lovely hostess gifts. Using dried fruit and the double-baking method means the biscotti stay fresh for the holiday season and beyond.



Serves 8 (3 to 4 cookies per person)

1 C. all-purpose flour
1 C. cornmeal
½ tsp. nutmeg
½ tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. salt
4 T. butter, room temp
1 C. sugar
2 eggs
Zest of 1 orange
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 C. dried cranberries

Optional: 1 egg + sanding or coarse sugar for topping

Whisk together the first five dry ingredients and set aside.

Beat the butter and sugar together well for 2 minutes.

Combine the eggs, orange zest and vanilla extract in a small bowl. Then beat the egg mixture into the butter mixture. Add the dry ingredients gradually, until well incorporated. Stir in the dried cranberries last, so they don't stain the dough.

Cover the dough in plastic wrap and chill 20 to 30 minutes. On a floured surface, roll dough into two logs, each about 12 inches long. Place on a parchment-lined cookie sheet about 3 inches apart. Chill the whole pan for another 20 to 30 minutes. Preheat the oven to 350°.

Brush the chilled logs with a beaten egg and sprinkle with sanding sugar before baking, if desired. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until golden brown and firm to the touch. Remove from oven and reduce oven temperature to 300°.

Cool cookie logs for 10 minutes until easy to handle, and transfer to a cutting board. Using a serrated knife, slice each log into ½-inch slices. Return slices to baking sheet, cut side down, and toast for about 15 minutes, until dry and firm.

Individual Apple-Cranberry Tarts Tatin

Pastry chef Jennifer Roach-Dixon has excellent pro tips to make these simple and beautiful tatin in a home kitchen. First, use store-bought puff pastry. And whether you use fresh or frozen cranberries, cut each berry in half crosswise to expose a pretty floral design in the fruit. Finally, this recipe can be made up to 12 hours in advance, held at room temperature and then rewarmed right before serving. Perfect for an impressive dessert when entertaining.



Serves 12

For the caramel:

1 C. sugar
1 tsp. corn syrup
¼ C. water
4 T. butter, cut in small cubes, salted preferred

For the tatin:

1 sheet of store-bought frozen puff pastry
½ C. frozen or fresh cranberries
3 medium Granny Smith apples

Prepare a standard 12-cavity muffin tin by spraying with nonstick cooking spray.

Make the caramel by combining the sugar, corn syrup and water in a small saucepan, away from heat. Stir until the consistency is like wet sand.

Cook over medium-high heat, without stirring, until it caramelizes to a deep amber color, about 5 to 7 minutes. As it gets darker, reduce heat and remove from heat just before it becomes as dark as you want it (the radiant heat will finish the cooking).

Whisk the cubes of butter into the caramel until fully smooth. Then divide evenly into the 12 muffin tin cups.

Start to prepare the tatin by thawing the puff pastry.

Next, divide the cut cranberries evenly among the caramel-coated cups, cut-side down.

Peel and quarter apples, keeping each quarter separate. Cut out core and slice ¼-inch thick. Keeping slices together, divide and arrange upside-down (curved, peeled side against cranberries/the bottom of the tin, with the flat, cored side facing up). Set aside.

Unroll the thawed puff pastry and prick all over with a fork. Using a round cutter or a drinking glass slightly larger than the muffin tin cavities, cut out 12 rounds of puff pastry. Place on top of each apple-filled cavity, tucking edges in slightly around apples.

Chill tatin in freezer 15 minutes. Preheat oven to 375°.

Place muffin pan on a cookie sheet and bake for 15 minutes. Rotate pan, lower heat to 350° and bake for an additional 10 minutes, or until pastry is golden brown and puffed, and caramel is seen bubbling around edges.

Cool for 30 minutes, then unmold while warm. (Or, bake up to 12 hours in advance, wrap well when completely cool and store at room temp. Rewarm muffin pan for 5 to 7 minutes at 300° when ready to invert.)

To unmold, place a piece of waxed or parchment paper on top of warm muffin tin, then a cookie sheet, and flip over. Gently remove tin. Tatins should pop out easily. If they don't release, warm in oven a bit longer.

Cranberry Panna Cotta

Panna cotta, Italian “cooked cream,” is known for its silky texture and understated elegance. In this version, cranberries lend a festive note, adding both color and brightness. Simple to prepare ahead, it makes a graceful finale for holiday gatherings.



Serves 8

1½ C. cranberries, fresh or frozen
¾ C. sugar, divided
¼ C. water
3 sheets gelatin
3 C. heavy cream
1 tsp. vanilla extract

Combine cranberries, ¼ cup sugar and water in a medium pot. Cook over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, for 8 to 10 minutes, until the berries are completely broken down. Set aside.

Place the gelatin sheets in a bowl of cold water to soften, about 2 minutes. Remove once soft, squeeze out excess water and set aside.

Add the cream, ½ cup sugar and vanilla extract to the cranberry mixture. Warm over medium heat 5 to 7 minutes, stirring occasion-

ally, until just warm enough to dissolve the sugar.

Transfer to a blender or use a stick blender to process into a smooth liquid. If using a blender, return the mixture to the pot. Add the softened gelatin and whisk until completely dissolved.

Strain the mixture and portion into eight 4-oz. glass jars, ramekins or cups. Chill for several hours before serving.

Pear & Cranberry Crisp

Sweet pears and tart cranberries baked under a buttery oat topping make a seasonal dessert that's both rustic and elegant. Chef Jen notes you can prepare the filling and topping separately, then combine just before serving to keep the texture crisp. Because the flour is added with the spices, gluten never forms. Even tastier served warm with ice cream.



Serves 8

Filling/base:

6 ripe pears (Bartlett, red or similar), peeled, cored and diced into ½-inch cubes (about 7 C.)
3 C. frozen or fresh cranberries
1 C. sugar
¾ C. water
2 tsp. cinnamon
1 tsp. nutmeg
2 T. orange juice

Topping:

2 T. sugar
¼ C. brown sugar
½ stick butter (4 T.), room temperature
1 C. rolled oats
⅓ C. all-purpose flour
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. cinnamon
½ tsp. nutmeg
Optional: ¼ tsp. cardamom or allspice

Berry Clever Tablescapes & Tricks

'Tis the season for fresh cranberries. With bags of those little rubies piled in the produce department, who can resist?

And if you've seen an Ocean Spray commercial, you know the classic harvest: farmers flood the bog, step into waders and rake the floating berries across the water. That image is real — most cranberries for juice and sauce are gathered this way. Although the fresh berries we buy bagged are usually picked dry so they stay firm.

That's important for your holiday décor. The trick is knowing how to use cranberries without, well, bogging down your table.

Cranberries and plain water don't play well together. Drop them into a vase and they bob like buoys before turning themselves and the water slimy. Florists avoid that by nesting a smaller vase for water inside a larger clear bowl, then back-filling the outer ring with clean, dry berries. The result is the sparkle of “floating” cranberries without the mess.

For garlands, the insider's tip is to use waxed dental floss, since the coating helps the needle glide through each berry. A knot, a small bead or a piece of popcorn every dozen berries keeps the strand from breaking as the fruit shrinks.

What's the trick when you see cranberry garlands still glossy weeks later? They've usually been sprayed with shellac or a clear acrylic sealer. That makes them strictly decorative and no longer edible, so best kept out of reach of curious pets or kids indoors and hungry wildlife outdoors.

Handled with care, cranberries shine like holiday jewels long after the bog is out of sight. How berry clever of you!

Place the peeled, diced pears in a medium pot. Add cranberries, sugar and water. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, 6 to 8 minutes or until fruit softens and releases juices.

Stir in cinnamon, nutmeg and orange juice. Cook another 30 seconds, then transfer the mixture to an ovenproof casserole dish, pie dish or square baking pan.

Preheat oven to 350°. In a medium bowl for the topping, cream together sugar, brown sugar and butter with a wooden spoon until smooth. Add oats and mix well.

In a small bowl, whisk together flour, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg and cardamom or allspice, if using. Add to the butter mixture. Use your hands to mix until combined. Then scatter evenly over the fruit filling.

Bake at 350° until the topping is crunchy and golden and the juices are bubbling, about 20 to 25 minutes.

Chef Omar's Cranberry Bread Pudding

Bread pudding dates back to the 11th and 12th centuries, when frugal

cooks in Europe found ways to use stale bread by soaking it in milk, eggs and fat before baking. Over time, this humble “poor man's pudding” became a beloved comfort dessert, adaptable to local ingredients and holiday flavors.



Serves 6 to 8

1 C. dried cranberries
1 C. diced apple
1 C. diced pears
1 T. butter
10 eggs
8 oz. heavy cream
2 T. sweetened condensed milk
1 tsp. vanilla extract
6 C. bread, cut in 1-inch cubes (Chef Omar uses a mixture of challah and brioche)
Powdered sugar for garnish
Caramel drizzle for garnish

Preheat oven to 350°. In a large saute pan over medium heat, melt butter and cook cranberries, apples and pears until tender.

In mixing bowl, whisk eggs and cream together. Add vanilla and sweetened condensed milk. Set aside.

In a large bowl, place the bread cubes and add the sauteed fruit mixture. Mix together so fruits are dispersed through bread cubes. Then add to a buttered casserole dish. Pour custard on top.

Bake at 350° until done, about 24 minutes. Garnish with a sprinkle of powdered sugar and a drizzle of caramel if desired. ♦

RECIPE PHOTOS BY KATI BALDWIN

Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.



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